The Airborne Heavy Weapons Company in the COE

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"The only way the mortar team was able to evade your pursuit was by digging in, a tactic that does not play well to their strengths, and making it only a matter of time before you found them."

— Joint Multinational Readiness Center Observer/Controller

The contemporary Infantry heavy weapons company and its assault platoons bear little resemblance to its anti-tank counterparts of just 10 years ago. The integration of new technologies such as the Improved Target Acquisition System (ITAS) and the RQ-11 Raven unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) has transformed weapons companies into a much more capable and dynamic assault force within brigade combat teams (BCTs). In light of the recent publication of FM 3-21.12, *The Infantry Weapons Company,* and the development of the find, fix, finish, exploit, and analyze (F3EA) methodology, maneuver leaders at all levels must take the opportunity to reflect upon lessons learned from recent deployments to challenge and push the evolving limits of what assault platoons can provide to full spectrum operations.

This article is an attempt to promote discourse and facilitate leader understanding of the capabilities and limitations of an Infantry weapons company, in general, and an airborne Infantry weapons company, in particular. The findings and recommendations outlined in this article are based upon my own experiences as the company commander for Delta Company, 2nd Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division for more than 16 months. In light of my own experiences in training and after observing other weapons companies during their own mission rehearsal exercises, I found that weapons companies are often misunderstood and unnecessarily doctrinally constrained by their legacy "anti-tank" role with the seemingly defensive tasks of blocking and screening. However, a better understanding of this company's capabilities and its organic assets can enable maneuver commanders at all levels to further exploit the contemporary assault platoon or weapons company in the conduct of full-spectrum operations.

SPC John Coble of D Company, 2nd Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, mans the ITAS during a company attack.

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Composition

Similar to the Infantry weapons company outlined in FM 3-21.12, an Airborne weapons company is composed of four assault platoons, each with two squads of vehicles comprised of two gun trucks each. However, unlike the platoons depicted in FM 3-21.12, an assault platoon in the 82nd Airborne Division does not have organic Javelins. Alternatively, platoons have the capability to mount on their gun trucks up to two each M240B 7.62mm machine guns, M2 .50 caliber machine guns, MK-19 automatic grenade launchers, or TOW ITAS. They also have one cargo HMMWV and HMMWV trailer. That assault platoon is comprised of the platoon leader (0-2), platoon sergeant (E-7), section sergeant (E-6), and two squads consisting of the squad leader (E-5), two gunners (E-4), two to three riflemen/drivers (E-4), and two assistant gunners/drivers (E-3), for a total of 18 personnel.

Within an airborne infantry battalion, a weapons company should be the first company filled with all key leader positions, ideally leaders with previous experience at their current pay grade.

Within an airborne brigade combat team (ABCT), assault platoons provide invaluable capabilities as far as maneuver, firepower, and overwatch. With the potential need to transport or secure casualties, detainees, or noncombatants seeking protection — and with the ever-present need to reinforce or react to contact throughout the perimeter — every single gun truck serves as a battalion-level asset. In theater, gun trucks afford the battalion with a means of transporting and immediately placing into operation a variety of key assets, including the Raven. With organic weapons systems, the airborne assault platoons greatly enhance an ABCT's ability to find, fix, and finish the enemy. As far as finding the enemy, the ITAS itself provides an assault platoon with an unprecedented ability to scan an engagement area, engage a variety of threats up to and including an armored enemy, provide overwatch, facilitate named area of interest (NAI) reconnaissance, and call for fire. Assault platoons provide more direct firepower than rifle companies. The M2 has a significant psychological and area effect, and can effectively fix, if not finish, a motorized enemy. Additionally, the MK-19 also provides increased dead space coverage well beyond the M203 within rifle platoons. All three of these systems enhance an assault platoon's ability to close with a suppressed enemy, and under more restrictive rules of engagement (ROE), the M240B can supplement the ability for that platoon to finish the enemy. One section, mutually supported or overwatched by another element, can scan more open terrain than multiple dismounted platoons. Granted, the absence of the Javelin system does decrease the specific anti-tank capabilities of the airborne weapons company compared to that depicted in FM 3-21.12. However, the introduction of the M240B into the weapons configuration does provide assault platoon leaders with a wider menu of munitions to conduct escalation of force and consequence management within the unique ROE following an airborne assault.

Despite the capabilities of the airborne heavy weapons company, there are several key limitations. The greatest constraint for an organic weapons company is manpower. Although having four platoons provides an added capability as far as the number of maneuver elements, each of those elements is considerably smaller than a rifle platoon and thus more affected by taskings or personnel shortages, particularly leaders. In a four-vehicle convoy, this would facilitate an absolute maximum of nine dismounts, leaving only gunners scanning sectors, drivers monitoring the radio, and one TC to command and control the vehicles, with no backup personnel to react in the event of a downed gunner. This limits the assault platoon's capacity to engage with the population to the same extent as a dismounted rifle platoon, particularly in an urban setting. During an extended deployment, once environmental morale leave is incorporated into the troop-to-task, this number quickly deteriorates to five to seven dismounts. Within an airborne operation, assault platoons face several major challenges and variables. Depending upon the assembly procedures, it may take up to an hour to have one section fully-mission capable, and up to two hours to place an entire platoon's vehicles into operation. Second, assault platoons can quickly dissolve and have difficulty covering initial objectives in the event of a damaged vehicle. This can force truck crews to operate dismounted, which may necessitate a task organization change on the ground depending upon the mission for that platoon or company, a contingency that should always be included in planning and rehearsals.

Manning and Training Priorities

Within an airborne infantry battalion, a weapons company should be the first company filled with all key leader positions, ideally leaders with previous experience at their current pay grade. Though a rifle platoon has more than twice as many personnel and four squads to command and control, the complexity of the many different assets available and potential mission sets for an assault platoon demands experienced and mature leadership. In order to place leaders where they can have the most impact on the battalion-level fight as far as where they may end up on the battlefield and the volume of effects that they directly control, platoon leaders and platoon sergeants should already have served in that capacity in rifle platoons. Section sergeants should also already have served as weapons squad leaders in rifle platoons. Weapons companies are often task organized such that individual platoons or even sections operate decentralized in order to support other company or specialty platoons. This requires a mature leader who can inherently operate away from organic leadership and provide sustainment training and weapons support to other leaders potentially less familiar with that platoon's or section's capabilities.

Additionally, the second- and third-order effects of leader vacancies have more serious consequences in a weapons company. For instance, in the absence of one E-6 section sergeant, one of the two E-5 squad leaders must serve as the section sergeant, leaving an E-4 as a squad leader and vehicle TC. That E-4 is now responsible for one of the four types of mounted weapons systems, three different dismounted weapons systems, two radios, a blue force tracking (BFT) system, three other personnel, and would potentially be the senior individual present in a decentralized escalation of force incident. Alternatively, an E-4 in a rifle platoon that serves as a team leader to fill an E-5 vacancy is responsible for three different weapons systems and three other personnel. Battalion commanders

need to look closely at the officers and NCOs who serve in their heavy weapons companies in order to fully leverage the available assets and mitigate the inherent limitations of the smaller platoons.

Though assault platoons are often task organized such that they fall under rifle companies while conducting sustained combat operations, I recommend against the practice of decentralizing the assault platoons to fall under rifle company headquarters prior to the execution of a full training cycle with the weapons company consolidated. With the complexity of the equipment in an assault platoon, and given the constraints on training sites that can afford an opportunity to train with those systems, assault platoons' manning, training, and equipment is best supervised by a single company headquarters. I had the opportunity to go through an entire training cycle with all four platoons, allowing us to follow the progression from the Raytheon ITAS Operator's Course, to the ITAS Basic Skills Trainer (BST), to firing live TOW missiles at Camp LeJeune, N.C. Only after completing this cycle had all four platoons had enough supervised training on each of the weapons systems to afford them the capacity to effectively decentralize throughout the battalion task force to provide weapons and anti-tank overwatch and reconnaissance support.

Airborne heavy weapons companies must prioritize the training on the ITAS, the one remaining organic anti-tank weapon system. I cannot overemphasize the importance of maintaining proficiency for gunners on the ITAS. Without this proficiency, the company lacks the ability to finish an armored threat, severely inhibiting its capacity to impact the F3EA at the battalion level. Because I was very unfamiliar with the system when I assumed command, I sought out the assistance of the Raytheon contact team at Fort Bragg to provide higher-level training. My company had not used the ITAS on the previous deployment to any large extent, and the last training support package on the system had been conducted in the fall of 2006. I contacted the Raytheon team concerning its 54-hour ITAS Operator's Course. This course proved to be extremely valuable in the level of understanding my gunners acquired as far as the system itself and the current munitions in theater. Each BCT should schedule this course semiannually for all ITAS gunners, as it is designed to train approximately 25 personnel and would ensure that new gunners have baseline proficiency with the system. Raytheon also provides a four-hour leader's course oriented towards maneuver commanders and S-3s who may command and control assault platoons. After firing more than 100 TOW missiles during its last 14-month rotation to Afghanistan, the 173rd ABCT recommended that every gunner fire a live TOW missile prior to deployment. BCTs must make every effort to afford maximum opportunities to fire TOW missiles. Only by placing an annual training event on the calendar to ensure that all ITAS gunners fire live munitions can a unit ensure that proper emphasis is being place on retaining this vital skill set, particularly in the event of a conventional conflict.

All Infantry commanders, and particularly weapons company commanders, must also stress UAV training. The quality of the imagery has improved dramatically just since the original fielding of the RQ-11 in 2005. I made the Raven a priority for training and have almost reached the standard of having two qualified operators per platoon. After experimentation with battery life and sustainable flight frequency, I find that with eight operators (who can rotate according to their assigned duties and responsibilities) and two complete Raven aircraft systems, barring major maintenance issues it is possible to sustain 8-12 hours of flights per day with minimal impact on the platoon manning. Those 8-12 hours, accompanied by an ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) matrix, can provide innumerable benefits as far as area or objective reconnaissance, pattern of life behavioral monitoring, and route reconnaissance for patrols. Even more important than the maintenance of their flying proficiency is the routine communication between squad- and platoon-level leaders and Raven operators, which also serves as a means of developing junior leaders who constantly train in a combined-arms atmosphere. Only through routine interaction during all collective training events can leaders understand the capabilities and limitations of the Raven and ensure that operators understand how they can best support those leaders.

Employment of Assault Platoons

Cordon and Search Operations — The primary advantage that a weapons company has in conducting a cordon and search derives from the integration of the ITAS and the Raven to provide effective overwatch and early warning of enemy activity. In an urban environment, leaders must do a cost-benefit analysis of whether or not to mount the ITAS if they lack the ability to mount both the ITAS and an automatic weapon system. With the limited field of view that the gunner has in the ITAS optic, he sacrifices breadth of coverage for specificity. With regards to force protection, especially for improvised attacks like the RKG-3, gunners would be unlikely or even discouraged from opening up with the heavy weapon system first, and would most likely end up engaging with the M4 in the turret. Thus, even in an urban environment there may still be merit to mounting an ITAS with an M4 also in the turret, even if it means having one less M240B, MK-19, or M2 in that environment.

Whenever possible, one ITAS vehicle should be centrally-located within the cordoned area to scan the surrounding area for activity, particularly at night. The optical zoom would make it possible, even during the day, for the gunner to identify anyone attempting to take pictures or video the operation, or possibly personnel serving as early warning. For daytime operations, leaders need to assign very clear NAIs or points of interest to the gunners due to the limits of their field of view. At night, however, gunners would have more freedom to move quickly through their designated sectors of fire, given the clearly visible thermal image that personnel would give if they were observing or attempting to initiate contact through windows or doorways. Even personnel well back from the window itself can be observed, and a very quick determination could be made as far as gender, body positioning, the presence of threatening materials or hostile intent. In addition to scanning from the inside of the cordon to observe activity, the ITAS can also be used to monitor and scan the exfiltration route.

For operations like the cordon and search

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SPC Benjamin West of D Co., 2-325th AIR, mans the M240B and MK-19 on a dual-mount configured HMMWV.

where dismounts are a planned portion of the operation, the best tactic we found for command and control was for the platoon leader and FO to be part of the dismount element, with the platoon sergeant remaining with the vehicles. This allowed the platoon sergeant to supervise the overwatch element and the sectors of fire for the weapons, and it also affords him the most flexibility as far as either maintaining the platoon casualty collection point (CCP) at the pre-designated vehicle or to move the CCP to the point of injury for medical evacuation, while providing him the more robust communications platform possible between the ASIP on a poweramp or through an expedited BFT message to the higher headquarters.

One major disadvantage with weapons' direct involvement in cordon and search operations pertains again to the number of dismounts, particularly if there are other enablers (military working dogs, Civil Affairs team, etc.) that require additional security. Under absolutely ideal circumstances, a mounted assault platoon may have six to nine dismounts available, though during sustained combat operations this more realistically becomes four to six personnel, barely enough for a local national engagement. When operating entirely dismounted, an assault platoon can effectively engage the population and operate independently with an adequate battalion quick reaction force (QRF) readiness status. However, if trucks must be manned, then individual assault platoons face significant task organization and security challenges.

The UAV should also be incorporated into the cordon and search. It can provide overwatch or route reconnaissance for the infiltration route, or simply observe the objective. Though the RQ-11 does emit an audible noise, a technique called the "silent approach" can be used to drift from a high to a low altitude using the motor minimally. This ability to identify personnel moving inside or outside of the intended perimeter can have a significant impact on intelligence development. After the operation, the UAV can also be integrated to overwatch the objective area to gather atmospherics for any potential enemy personnel that seek to intimidate members of the local population.

Deliberate Raids

An assault platoon's organic assets also facilitate the execution of deliberate raids. During the platoon situational training exercise (STX) during our mission rehearsal exercise (MRE), platoons were tasked to conduct a deliberate raid on a known enemy compound after confirming the presence of weapons smugglers. After conducting a terrain analysis using the BFT circular line of sight (LOS) tool, platoons identified an ideal overwatch position that was out of earshot for the enemy, approximately 600 meters away to overwatch the objective. Using the ITAS, platoons could easily confirm or deny the presence and activity of the weapons smugglers and have a variety of means to find, fix and finish the enemy. With a confirmed LOS, the long range optics make it possible to determine the exact composition, disposition, and strength of the personnel on the compound, well beyond heavy PAS-13s or "three bys" organic to rifle platoons. The ITAS can also greatly enhance the effectiveness of indirect fires, either by confirming pre-planned targets or using the laser range finder (Far Target Locator [FTL] available in theater) to receive an immediate and accurate distance and direction. In conjunction with a 10-digit grid from the BFT, forward observers can call in an accurate and expedited call-for-fire mission through the instantaneous polar information. Units with the 173rd Airborne Brigade found this tactic to be highly effective, usually placing indirect fire rounds on target with just one adjustment.

Beyond reconnaissance and overwatch, the platoon can use the ITAS to engage a hardstand building with minimal collateral damage. The 173rd again pioneered the usage of the ITAS against buildings. The bunker buster munitions now available in theater, combined with the accuracy of the ITAS, significantly mitigates historic collateral damage concerns. With a positive identification and an ROE that would afford this type of engagement, a target can be conclusively identified and engaged by the same sensor-shooter. The patrol leader can also use the connected video screen to observe what the gunner is seeing in their optics and provide firing commands to the gunner. Finally, if the intelligence that may be obtained on the objective warrants a tactical call prior to finishing the enemy on the objective, then the assault platoon leader has an optimal array of capabilities, particularly if the UAV is airborne, to find, fix, and, if the tactical callout is unsuccessful, finish the enemy on the objective.

The combination of speed and overwhelming firepower can also provide a mobile support by fire that can immediately establish superiority of fire and effectively fix the enemy. Thermals can then be used to continue to assess any movement on the objective before ever dismounting and using the vehicles for cover to the

objective area. Though an assault platoon may be a likely candidate for the routine or permanent PSD for battalion or higher-level leaders given its size on paper, this role may not make full use of its capabilities unless it is part of a deliberate tactical command post. Even up to three or four kilometers away from an objective, if a line of sight with the objective area is possible, senior leaders riding as part of a convoy with an assault platoon could have direct control over the UAV ISR before, during, and after the operation through the on-board Raven operator, and would have a robust capability to identify targets for indirect fire and provide intelligence updates on the objective area.

Search and Attack Missions

Airborne heavy weapons companies and assault platoons are best suited for search and attack or deterrence missions, particularly in non-urban environments. During my own MRE, we integrated the Raven UAV and our ITAS to conduct a search and attack mission on a mortar team operating in wooded terrain. Though we were unsuccessful in destroying or detaining the individuals involved in this instance, our pursuit was highly effective in denying the enemy's ability to use the terrain outside of the towns to conduct indirect fire attacks, decreasing the number of attacks from 10 in the previous 48 hours to zero in the subsequent 48 hours that we conducted the search and attack missions. The integration of the UAV and the usage of the ITAS in a rural environment demonstrated the potential for conducting combined operations at the company level to dominate the three-dimensional battlespace. These operations also emphasized the potential for the airborne heavy weapons company in purely offensive operations in order to dominate the surrounding battlespace.

The current tracking mechanisms for the Raven afford more opportunities to use the Raven during mounted operations, even if the takeoff and landing areas are different. When conducting these search and attack missions, on multiple occasions, I designated primary and alternate takeoff and landing sites. We would launch from one position, and then have the antennae projecting through the turret of a HMMWV, with the assistant operator ensuring that the directional antennae continued to communicate with the aircraft. This afforded us an opportunity to use the full battery power, usually 45 minutes to one hour depending upon wind, to attempt to pursue possible enemy with an internal aerial platform under our direct control. We would then set up a hasty security perimeter when we needed to land the aircraft, change out the battery, and then resume the operation. In concert with the ITAS, the UAV provided the company with multiple means of identifying the enemy or, at a minimum, severely restricting his movement.

Photo courtesy of the author

SSG Paul Williams and SGT Freddy Salmeron provide feedback to SPC Christopher Richardson during a .50-caliber range.

The actual maneuver of forces looked very much like a company-level bounding overwatch. In one particular operation within two hours we effectively dominated approximately 15 square kilometers with just three platoons, destroying the one enemy element present within that battlespace. We routinely used the LOS tool on the BFT to identify higher, open terrain where we could emplace a stationary force with a retrans COM 201 and an ITAS scanning designated terrain, while the bounding element would seek to cover dead space or canalize possible enemy mortar teams into the line of sight of the stationary element. Communication and a common operating picture were critical during these operations. With a stationary Raven team back at the COP or with the overwatch ITAS element, all platoons involved in the operation would receive updates on the location of personnel or vehicles in the battlespace and could provide near real-time 10-digit grids for possible enemy locations. In the absence of previously developed NAIs, these patrols converted a traditional movement to contact into a deliberate search and attack, with the Raven providing information on possible enemy activity which could be confirmed by the overwatch ITAS element or the maneuver element.

After the operation, we learned from the observer/controllers that the only means the mortar team had of evading our pursuit was by digging into the terrain. Given their propensity to remain mobile and blend into the population in this Afghanistan-based scenario, this severely limited their freedom of movement and their ability to disrupt friendly operations via indirect fire attacks.

Defensive Operations

The assault platoons have even more potential in enhancing a company or battalion-level defensive position. Whether as part of a FOB defense or the establishment and expansion of a lodgement during an airborne operation, assault platoons have the ability to enhance a unit's ability to conduct engagement area development.

With the use of the BFT, an assault platoon can do a detailed map and imagery reconnaissance of the potential defensive position or likely avenues of approach. This contributes directly to the identification of the primary and contingency engagement areas. The assault platoon also has more options as far as weapons systems to ensure that dead space is covered through the use of the M203 or MK-19, and that multiple kill zones are established with a defense in depth. The mobility and storage capabilities of the gun trucks provides the airborne assault platoon with the ability to quickly emplace and retrieve obstacles, and also to conduct physical reconnaissance of the engagement area and any dead space to plan and integrate indirect fires. BFT then affords a quick opportunity to graphically depict the entire patrol base and the indirect fires plan for the higher headquarters.

In the event of a unit conducting an extended ground assault convoy over the course of multiple days, the Raven can work in conjunction with the ITAS to provide overwatch of the surrounding area and provide a means of early warning to maintain the initiative even when conducting a mounted patrol base or even a short halt. In these instances, ensure that an unobstructed runway of approximately 75-meters long by 25-meters wide is available, and take into consideration the approximate 10 minutes it takes to conduct preflight testing. The Raven and ITAS in concert can facilitate the establishment of a vehicular patrol base, which we did at the company level during our MRE. By burying our 3K generator and conducting a cold-start every two hours and running the vehicles for 20 minutes to maintain the vehicle battery life, and by camouflaging our vehicles and choosing a position off of the main lines of drift but with overwatch of those lines of drift, we were able to minimize our physical and audible signature and establish a robust and effective defensive position.

If another nation was to request the assistance of a coalition force where we would be establishing a base of operations within friendly borders and projecting forces in a stability and support capacity, conducting counterinsurgency operations, or in training role supporting and assisting host-nation forces with full-spectrum operations, higher-level planners should take into consideration these capabilities, particularly in site selection for forward operating bases or combat outposts. On open terrain — either in the mounted or, ideally, in an elevated dismounted position — the ITAS could provide a constant means of reconnaissance and observation for key avenues of approach. Perhaps the best position for such an operating base would be in an open rural environment or on relatively high ground where the ITAS could see 3-5 kilometers in each direction, severely limiting a potential adversary's ability to conduct harassment operations on the outpost itself or emplace IEDs along key routes. This would also severely impact the enemy's ability to influence the local population by mitigating the danger they face purely due to their proximity to coalition forces compounds.

The Way Ahead

As far as potential improvements or enhancements of current capabilities, BCTs should receive the ITAS with FTL capabilities starting in the fall of 2010. Raytheon should also consider adding a target designation capability to the system. In the event that a gunner or leader on the ground identifies a target that would be more appropriately engaged by close air support or attack aviation. Or if he simply wants to draw the attention of other gunners or dismounts in the area towards a potential target, then a large IR (hellfire equivalent or larger) would allow a gunner to do just that. The 173rd ABCT has found a way to mount a PEQ-2 to the ITAS system as a means of designating sectors of fire or to provide an IR signature, but a much larger designator would greatly enhance the systems potential as a reconnaissance or ISR asset for the battalion.

As far as the Raven, battalions should look closely at the task organization of their companies with respect to Raven operators and the push for company intelligence support teams (COIST). Two qualified operators per platoon could also serve as COIST personnel. That way the personnel responsible for developing NAIs and analyzing patterns of life within the company are also the same individuals operating the Raven and executing the ISR synch matrix. Another course of action that should be explored at the battalion level in airborne units includes pushing additional UAVs to the assault platoons as the primary means of transporting the asset and as the elements most likely to be operating remotely. Any push for COIST or battalion-level UAV elements within weapons companies, however, would require additional manpower given the primary constraint for those elements.

Given the uniqueness of a weapons company and the sheer breadth of missions it can execute, leaders at all levels should ensure that they understand the specific capabilities and limitations of the systems that make it a highly lethal and dynamic force. Whether the commander's intent is to defend friendly structures through a more comprehensive defense and ISR plan, to more closely monitor activity in adjacent buildings in an urban environment, or to pursue the enemy when he chooses to separate himself from the population, an assault platoon has all the tools to facilitate or even individually execute almost any mission in the contemporary operating environment.

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